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ABSTRACT

Mother Centers are a grassroots self-help movement in Germany that help stay-at-home mothers break through the isolation they experience in German society when they have children and are not available for full-time employment. There are about 300 mother center projects currently in Germany, including 40 in the former East Germany. The programs provide a drop-in space for mothers with children where they can meet other mothers and where their children can make friends. They also provide organized activities and services such as laundry, hair care, and child care, provided by mothers themselves on a part-time basis. These centers ease the isolation that mothers feel when they are out of the work force, and they also help women ease the transition back into the work force. (KC)

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The Mother Centers in Germany - Empowerment Strategies for Community Women in Germany

What are mother centers?

Mother Centers are a grassroot self help movement, springing up all over the country and now also extending to the eastern part of Germany.
They are sucessful to such an extent that we speak about a "historical need".

In Germany the period of parental leave is 3 years and the majority of women stay at home for this period of time or longer after the birth of a child. The hosewife life style is still valid in Germany, in West Germany more by choice, the general feeling being that young children are best taken care of by their mothers Also in West Germany the net male wage level permits families to live off of one wage, which has to do with the german tax system that supports the provider model. In East Germany many mothers are at home partly by choice but often because of the high rate of unemployment among women in East Germany.

In the mother centers women break through the isolation they experience in our society when they have children and become "deviant" from the male life style, around which society and public life is organised.
The work world and public culture function on the basis of fulltime availability for the labor market, leaving family obligations up to others. For men these others are usually their wives, for working and career women these others usually are other women, the grandmother, the daycare mother, the nanny, the kindergarden teacher.

Most women in Germany do not follow the male pattern of total availability for work and public life. When they have children they choose to stay at home for a period of time or to cut down on working hours and career aspirations in order to

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create space in their lives to tend to children and to family life.
In the mother centers public visibility is created for female life styles, for the work women are taking on in the family and the contribution to society this involves.
The centers mean that the workplace of a mother in the private home is opened up and that mothers learn to use more social space both for themselves and for their children.
There are about 300 mother center projects currently in Germany, including 40 in the former GDR.

Despite the widely described and avowed isloation women experience when they stay at home to take care of young children, there is a lack of response to institutional support programs. Many parents have negative associations towards school-like structures and teacher-student attitudes parent education programs often convey. This is especially true for mothers who often are intimidated by the culture of hostility towards children they experience in public environments.
Very little positive experiences with public spaces outside the family are available, often causing a retreat into private life.
This retreat can lead to very defensive strategies in dealing with other people, neighbors, spouses and the children themselves.

Many mothers very impressively describe a process of loss of self-confidence, which they experience when living with children, a life, which demands different rhythms and laws than those constituted by public norms.
They speak of a "trap": On the one hand mothering demands an incredible growth of responsibility, competence and self-reliance. On the other hand, this process of development and growth cuts them off from public values which are based on earning money, on principles of success and competition and on (fulltime) labor force participation.
The insecurity in dealing with public life goes down the line to the children, who in turn are not introduced to the rules of public life, until they enter the rather strict environment of school.

In West Germany many women, when they first become mothers, quit their work situation, especially if they are in disadvantageous jobs and enjoy their new life: to have an own household, an own apartment, an own area of autonomy and

responsibility for the children. They manage well and want to be acknowledged for that.
In East Germany women often find themselves at home with small children out of a mixture of internal and external factors. Unemployment in East Germany is especially high for women with small children. However, there also is a tendency now among east german women to indulge more in family life than it was the norm in the former GDR.
Problems emerge in both parts of Germany from the fact that women feel too isolated and left alone in their day-to-day life with small children. It is difficult for them to initiate new friendships, contacts and neighborhood relations in a new environment, physically new environment because many families move to new accomodations when their children are born, and socially new environment, because social interests and friendships tend to change during this period of the life cycle.
As the family budget in this phase of life is usually limited, women often look for jobs on the informal market. These jobs often create additional stress or feelings of guilt.

Mother centers respond to this dilemma by offering it all: contacts, peer group exchange as well as opportunities to earn money.
The activities in the mother centers are paid. The range of jobs goes from childcare, group counselling, running the mother center coffee shop, doing the bookkeeping or offering services for the participating mothers, for instance: hairdresser-service, secondhand shop, beauty parlor, sewing courses, massage, repair service for frequent problems in the household, nutrition councelling, ironing service etc.
The mothers can bring their children along to these "jobs" in the centers.
Although not constituting an equivalent or substitute to regular employment, but rather a range of family friendly "on the side jobs" to supplement the family income , the money earned in the centers - no matter how small or symbolic these sums may be - constitutes an invaluable bridge over the schism of family life and the work world, as women experience it in present society. It contributes greatly to increasing self confidence, by increasing the visibility of womens´work and the acknowledgement of the contribution of mothers to society.

But even as a regular participant with no special task, visiting the mother center can relieve the household budget by making use of inexpensive services, (second -hand clothes, cheap toys, cheap repair services, childcare).
The centers create a lot of room for the women involved to try out their skills and to raise their self esteem.
Mother centers are a space where mothers receive public acknowledgement, knowledge, a public scope of action and room for contemplation. The entry point is unintimidating, a cup of coffee they buy in the mothers centers coffee shop.

Mother centers avoid school like learning. In the centers they, the mothers are the experts. All activities are organised and carried out by the mothers themselves. Professionals if at all have a supporting role, they do not determine the daily events.
The centers function on a drop in basis, whenever it fits the family rhythm. Regular events, however, do exist, continuously providing occasions to visit the center.
In a historical perspective the goal of the centers is to reweave lost networks, to recreate neighborhoods that have been diluted in the process of industrialisation.

It is crucial to recognise, that this self help potential is not encouraged if professionals go on defining and categorising family socialisation in terms of "neurotic mothers" and "distrubed children".
Our present society offers only two alternatives for mothers, either to be a "working mother or "only" a housewife. The mother centers focus on creating an alternative for all the ambivalent women who do not find themselves represented in these two alternatives, who need an in-between space. The centers are such a space.
Here children experience their mothers in a responsible public role, a learning process for both.

When a successfully innovative project comes about, often something very evident has become reality, one often wonders why it is new, it seems so natural or so obvious.
Something of the like happened with the mother centers. They are so convincing in their everyday reality, their daily stream of mothers and children, the intense neighborhood networks they induce, that one wonders why they haven´t been there forever.

However, traditional agencies of social work are often challenged by the mother centers because they question traditional principles and structures of institutional work:

- Many professionals have not learned to trust in the competence of parents, because an awareness of the expertise of parents themselves is seen as a threat to their professional identity.

- There is often also much resistance to pay for what is considered volonteer work. Paying neighborhood women is a contradiction to the basic social structure of unpaid private reproduction work.

- Professionals frequently emphasise the needs of children. In the mother centers there is also an emphasis and a sensitivity for the needs and interests of mothers as adults. This is a decisive difference to many play-groups or mother-toddler groups.
Nevertheless, or maybe for that very reason, the children profit a great deal through the mother centers. They learn to deal with each other and with adults in public situations.

Many more activities are possible in the presence of children, than our public culture often leads us to believe. There is not always a need to tuck away children into childcare, in order for adults to be able to go about their own interests.
A public adult culture, which involves the presence of children, is one of the central processes generated by the mother centers.

Reconciling the public and the private

Mother centers are a place where women own motherhood, a place where they are empowered by the experience of motherhood.
In industrial societies of today the experience of motherhood is marginalised, the mother child relationship experienced under conditions of isolation.
At the same time women are confronted with strong contradictory ideologies in public culture that don't correspond with the reality of motherhood as women experience it.

On the one side is the role model of the perfect mother, sacrificing all her needs and interests for the benefit and well being of the child and family . Of course this image is impossible to live up to.
On the other hand, however, there is an alternative public ideology, gaining ground in present northern societies, portraying children as a burden and barrier for the self realisation of women and personal freedom. This image escapes the reality of personal development through the experience of motherhood.
In the mother centers women meet and together build their identities and images of motherhood based on their own experiences rather than the ideologies they face in society.

The large gap contemporary society has created between the public and the private sphere contributes greatly to the marginalisation of mothers and children. Mother centers bridge this gap between private and public life by creating public space in the communities for children and adults to share, we call the mother centers sometimes our "public living rooms".
Women can enjoy a public life in the centers with all aspects of their personalities, including their identities as mothers. They do not have to stick to their "public personas", something that often costs a lot of energy, when women participate in male dominated public fields.

With this more wholistic approach the mother centers defy the male dominated rules of public life, creating an alternative, more female way of public interaction and community life, often rebuilding a sense of community, where it has been lost in the process of modernisation. They are a safe and caring place for many different life situations. For instance, Germany after reunification has become a popular destination for refugees of eastern countries and many of the centers are now involved in integrating refugee families into the communities.

The impact of the centers on the family and the community - a collection of quotes

" The children learn to deal with other children and other adults right from the start. It happens often that they don`t turn to their mothers but to one of the other adults around, if they need attention or care."

"Joseph used to cover his mothers eyes or mouth to emphasise his claim on her. It took him a while to learn that his mother has interests of her own. Now, however, he sometimes doesn´t want to leave the center when his mother does, because he too has developed his own network of friends and activities."

"Some of us mothers have become real experts in dealing with hords of children. We´ve learned how to get children of different ages to play with each other, we can see a fight coming and can prevent it, we know how to integrate shy children and how to gently lure them away from their mothers, when they seem to be too clinging. The more mothers that have been involved in the childcare programs of the center, the more the general atmosphere has become calm and patient towards all children".

"Dear mother, Can you imagine, our little Hans is the new trouble maker in the center. He bites and scratches other children. Thank goodness most of the other mothers are quite understanding. When I think back when Hans was 6 weeks old, I didn´t allow any one to get near him. When he began to walk, he often was shoved or pushed by other children. I remember having many quarrels with other mothers, I thought they just didn´t know how to bring up a child. And now Hans is having his aggressive phase.
A lot of us mothers by now have witnessed different generations of children growing in and out of the biting stage, so there´s a lot less panic now about Hans. What a change of perspective this has brought about."

The experience of the mother center gives the mothers involved more confidence and courage to defend the interests of their children in public:

"As a mother you fall out of the networks of your former friends, who don´t have children. People aren´t enthusiastic

about having children around. You are expected to keep them out of everyone´s way, to discipline them, so that they don´t break or dirty any property. I don´t like having to be the enemy of my child, so that it doesn´t get on anyone´s nerves. Sometimes I defend my kids against hostile environments, but I don´t always have the energy. The mother center gives me a lot of self confidence in this respect."

"I joined the mother center´s team because I wanted to learn to be articulate and assertive so that I can deal with the school and other places I have to represent my children."

"The other day, a bus driver didn´t want to take us. We were a group of 10 mothers and about twice as many children, trying to get on the bus. He sure got his lesson of the day! We were very articulate.. In the end he was really very patient and kind to the children."

Strengthening the neighborhoods

Insecurity and lack of self-confidence are often the cause of intolerant attitudes and communication problems towards others.
The mother centers are places where mothers from different class or cultural backgrounds meet, where they learn to understand people who think or behave in a different way, who have different life-styles, or who deal with their children in a different manner. A culture of public tolerance is developed.

"When you are at home with small children, you often don´t see very much farther than your own house. Your small circle of friends view life very similarly, have the same kind of marriages, have similar views. Your small world is quite unaminous. You start to lose the experience of being confronted and dealing with other views, other life styles.
In the center I´ve encountered many women I would have never dreamed of actually enjoying the company of in my old housewife days. I´m not so judgemental any more. I´ve learned to be a better listener. I´ve also learned to get used to the fact that people talk about me. I don´t fear conflict as much as I used to."

Mother centers are places where women find self esteem and a voice as mothers to reflect their experiences and competences and

to raise the issues they are concerned about from their everyday experiences in the communities and in society at large.
Mother centers are focal points in urban as well as rural settings to recreate neighborhoods that have been weakened and dried out by modernisation.
In the discussion on the crisis of democracy in Europe it has become very clear how important neighborhoods are for the social integration and democratic functioning of societies. Anonymous environments and isolation are key elements leading to the increase of violence and racism.
Strong neighborhoods are crucial for the development of a democratic society "from the bottom up".
Mother centers have proven to contribute greatly to create and sustain strong neighborhoods.

Support for reentry into the labor market

The centers have also proven to be very successful with retraining and reentry programs for women wishing to rejoin the labor market. Programs in the mothers centers are equipped with structural support services like childcare, lunch services, ironing and laudry services, pick-up and transport services for children, home-work support for children . Trainings are timed according to the rythmns of family life. Motivation of the participants is supported by organising peer group exchange and counselling of learning patterns.

For re-entry into the labor market the main issue is self esteem and self confidence. This is what many women lose, when they stay at home with small children and this is what is reestablished and strengthened in the mother centers.

In the centers the women discover or reinvent their talents, capacities and ressources, create new balances for reconciling public activity and family life and strengthen their courage to envision and demand a world that is accomodating towards a women with a child at her hand.
Some centers have created new job opportunities for women that allow for flexible work patterns and support services for working mothers.